ANALYSIS

How Israel Mastered Information Warfare in Gaza

Pro-Israel misinformation aimed at dismissing and discrediting Palestinian narratives is the fruit of a decade-long effort.

MARCH 11, 2024, 3:00 AM

By **Alessandro Accorsi**, a senior analyst for technology and conflict with the International Crisis Group.

The images of Hamas's Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel—during which around 1,200 men, women and children were killed—instantly became the centerpiece of an intense information warfare campaign. For the first time since the Second Intifada, global public opinion was exposed to mass Israeli civilian casualties as images of atrocities committed by Hamas and other armed groups as well as Gazan civilians circulated widely on social media.

Israel and pro-Israeli advocacy groups emphasized the horror of the massacre by distributing the images, mostly to western audiences , through paid advertisement videos on YouTube and X (formerly known as Twitter), in family-oriented videogames, and in screenings of a 45-minute supercut of the footage for select audiences, including in Washington, D.C. and Hollywood. The goal was not solely to raise awareness of the shocking events of Oct. 7, however. Instead, with the ads, the government claimed a right to defend its people and implied that the attacks extended a carte blanche for retaliation.

The use of social media as a tool of information warfare is not new in Israel. Since Israel's Operation Cast Lead, which killed more than 1,000 Gazans in December 2008 and January 2009, a battle of narratives on social media has become an essential part of the fractious discourse between Israelis and Palestinians. Palestinians and their supporters started using social media to disseminate evidence—texts, photographs, and videos—of civilian deaths and widespread destruction in Gaza to mobilize global public opinion against Israel. And the Israeli government, Israelis, and their supporters started employing social media to counter the Palestinians and their

social media conscripting the broader public into war efforts, over the next decade the Israeli state and its supporters sought to shape the global narrative around Israel's military operations, particularly during escalations with militants in Gaza. Yet for some time the Israeli efforts weren't quite as successful at influencing global public opinion as the organic and dynamic, albeit less organized, pro-Palestinian campaigns.

Roughly a decade ago, Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs began to oversee a network of influencers and pro-Israeli organizations that advanced the Israeli state's message against the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaign and other critics of the occupation, through deceptive, coordinated campaigns designed to appear grassroots-driven and spontaneous.

During Israel's 2021 war with Hamas, the Israel Defense Forces ran a covert social media campaign praising its bombing of Gaza to improve perception of its performance among the Israeli public. And Israel increased its digital diplomacy outreach to major Western technology companies. A Meta internal audit found that in 2021 the company censored Arabic content at a higher rate than

divested from moderation and fact-checking in 2023. Even before these changes, algorithms used by social media platforms favored content that triggered strong emotions, particularly anger. Musk has, in practice, abandoned X's stated ambition to be a global public sphere and removed checks that reined in outrage and misinformation. The platforms now function less as marketplaces of ideas and more as spaces to lock down one's own base and discredit those one believes are hostile to it.

Israeli and pro-Israeli actors have adeptly navigated these changes, leveraging the altered dynamics of social media to their advantage.

Hamas's graphic and live-streamed massacre on Oct. 7 last year, followed by Israel's extensive destruction of Gaza, provided a huge volume of images that served as ready-made content for this new digital environment. Israel has followed a four-pronged strategy in its information warfare: emphasize the horrors of the Oct. 7 massacre; discredit pro-Palestinian voices and justify the bombing of Gaza; limit the flow of information about the conflict coming out of Gaza; and rally the Israeli public by advertising its military prowess and destruction of Gaza.

Israel's investments over the past decade began to pay off as the details of the Oct. 7 massacre spilled over into the policy discourse. Several artificial intelligence (AI) companies in Israel and the United States that were supporting Israeli information warfare before the war began were ready to roll into action. Within days of the Hamas attack, Akooda, an Israeli technology company, created Words of Iron, an AI-powered application users could use to amplify social media posts and narratives supporting Israel and report posts critical of Israel—all while seeming grassroots and authentic.

U.S. President Joe Biden repeated at least twice misleading claims that first circulated on social media, including by top Israeli officials. On Oct. 10, Biden claimed to have seen pictures proving that Hamas had beheaded 40 children in the Oct. 7 attack—a charge that was disproved. That same night, the White House clarified that Biden had not seen the pictures. Then, on Oct. 28, Biden said that he had "no confidence" in casualty figures reported by the Hamas-controlled Ministry of Health in Gaza. The figures have turned out to be accurate.

campaign as a humanitarian fight to free Palestinians from Hamas. Emphasizing the violence of Hamas' attacks helped Israel tell a one-dimensional story of a multi-dimensional conflict—one that left out its decades of occupation, blockade of Gaza, and systematic violence against the Palestinians.

KIDNAPPED
AM YISRAEL CHAI
Am Yisrael
BRING THEM HOME
Maxim Herkin 35 years old Israeli
Or Jacob 16 years old Israeli
Israel Will Prevail
IDF
AMERICANS AGAINST
WE STAND WITH ISRAEL
FREE HOSTAGES SUPPORT ISRAEL
PHILLY

Participants hold up posters of Hamas-held hostages during the March for Israel on the National Mall in Washington on Nov. 14, 2023. NOAM GALAI/GETTY IMAGES

Five months into the war, Israel has killed more than 30,000 Palestinians, injured more than 70,000, and displaced around 1.9 million from their homes. The Israeli airstrikes have created a level of urban destruction more severe than in Aleppo in Syria or Mariupol in Ukraine, destroying or damaging close to one-third of buildings in Gaza. As the extraordinary scale of civilian killings and destruction of homes in Gaza became visible on social media and protesters filled the streets in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States, Israel's information warfare strategy focused on deflecting attention from it.

To this end, Israel has capitalized on polarization in Europe and the United States by pushing a simple narrative: Criticizing the war is anti-Semitic and protesting the mass killing of Palestinians is to do the bidding of Hamas. Israel ran advertisement campaigns estimated to cost up to $7.1 million in October to accuse Palestinian supporters of being complicit in Hamas' crimes. The government efforts were supported by pro-Israeli groups, which in the United States spent more than $2 million in advertisements on social media, spending roughly 100 times more than Palestinian advocacy groups.

Israel's bid was partly helped by Palestinian supporters' own efforts to manipulate the information environment. Pro-Palestinian groups increasingly resorted to using misinformation themselves.

amplified these claims and other misleading content.

Since Oct. 7, members of Israel's cabinet and parliament have used increasingly dehumanizing language about Palestinians and Gaza aimed at blurring the line between Hamas combatants and Gaza's civilian population—some of which was cited in South Africa's filing against Israel at the International Court of Justice. This has been reflected on social media, where calls for Gaza to be "flattened," "erased" or "destroyed" were put out about 18,000 times in Hebrew posts on X in the first month of the war, compared to an average of 16 monthly mentions before the war.

While the Israeli government insisted that the use of such language wasn't official policy, Israel seems to have encouraged it as part of its social media strategy. In October, a psychological warfare unit of the Israel Defense Forces reportedly started a covert Telegram channel targeting the Israeli public, which posted thousands of images of soldiers killing Hamas militants and the destruction of Gaza. As the war progressed, an increasing number of Israeli soldiers posted videos from Gaza, gleefully boasting about killing Palestinians, dancing, or desecrating Palestinian graveyards.

Meanwhile, Israel continued running social media campaigns seeking to deflect criticism for the staggering death toll it has inflicted on Gaza's population. The official Israel account on X shared a video viewed nearly 10 million times of an alleged armed Hamas militant in the Indonesian Hospital in Gaza. The video actually showed a man holding a baton or crutch.

Journalists and humanitarian workers have been falsely accused of being complicit in crimes

backtracked on the claims, Israel's X account has not removed its posts promoting those discredited claims nor added a reference to Honest Reporting's clarifications.

The Israeli government understands that confused audiences gravitate toward selective facts that reinforce their existing notions of the conflict. Israel has controlled the flow of information by limiting international media access to Gaza, targeting communication infrastructure in Gaza, causing electricity blackouts, depleting users and internet providers of fuel needed to charge phones and servers, and imposing long internet blackouts. While it can't completely take Palestinians offline, the Israeli government has limited the amount of reliable information coming from the ground. At the same time, 70 Palestinian journalists were killed in the first two months of the war by Israeli airstrikes—a number that has since risen to 90.

Israel also vigorously lobbied social media platforms to take down content from Palestinians and their supporters, often labeling it as promoting terrorism. Human Rights Watch documented 1,050 takedowns of pro-Palestinian content by Meta in October and November 2023. Meta increasingly relied on AI-moderation systems that led to significantly reducing the visibility of pro-Palestinian posts, and to translating "Palestinian" into "terrorist" on Instagram.

In a polarized social media space, every fact has become contested. It seems that for every investigation into an Israeli airstrike or a firefight, there is an alternative framing of events. When an Israeli airstrike most probably hit a convoy of civilians fleeing on an evacuation route, hundreds of pro-Israel users and accounts pretending they were open source investigators worked to shift the focus to videos of an unrelated side-road explosion for which they blamed Hamas. One such tweet was viewed more than 1.1 million times.

stampede unclear. Israel claimed all the casualties resulted from the stampede despite evidence showing that many casualties resulted from Israeli forces opening fire. The army released highly edited drone footage but did little to support Israel's contention about what happened. Pro-Israel accounts blamed civilians for threatening Israeli troops and tried to sow doubt about whether shots were fired.

The pattern of information manipulation has repeated during several other incidents. As researchers and journalists rely on images from social media to conduct investigations, the widespread misinformation complicates their work and undermines their findings.

Israel's social media campaign also seeks to push back against the country's anti-war minority and pander to the right-wing electorate. The government cracked down on critics by passing an amendment to Israel's anti-terrorism law criminalizing consumption of anti-war content on social media and threatening shutdowns of television channels and their websites. Journalists have been harassed by right-wing mobs

By all appearances, Israel's social media strategy has been a tactical success. It has helped channel its supporters into one information universe, while leaving its critics and enemies in another. Within their bubble, Israel and its proxies can at the same time boast about the destruction of Gaza, deflect responsibility for their actions, and shrug off denunciations as missing the point. While the creation of social media echo chambers is not new, it is noteworthy that Israel's superior resources and technology has helped it insulate its supporters against a powerful and well

and resolve wars should also study it. After all, the more belligerents are able to disseminate parallel realities to their publics, the fewer opportunities there may be to make peace.

Alessandro Accorsi is a senior analyst for technology and conflict with the International Crisis Group.